

FROM THE PULPIT

Jesus Christ: Our Next Door Savior

"There's something wrong with this picture."

Remember those handouts in elementary school? The teacher would pass out drawings with the question at the bottom, "What's wrong with this picture?" We'd look closely for something that didn't fit. A barnyard scene with a piano near the water trough. A classroom with a pirate seated on the back row. An astronaut on the moon with a pay phone in the back-ground. We'd ponder the picture and point to the piano or pirate or pay phone and say, "This doesn't fit." Something is out of place. Something is absurd. Pianos don't go in barnyards. Pirates don't sit in classrooms. Pay phones aren't found on the moon and God doesn't nurse from Mary's breast or sleep in Peter's boat. But according to the Bible he did both! He did God things and man things. He is all God and all man. "For in Christ there is all of God in a human body." (Col. 2:9 LB) Jesus was not a God-like man, nor a man-like God. He was God-man. And because he was, we are left with these scratch-your-head, double-blink, what's-wrong-with-this-picture moments:

Mary changing God's diaper.

A 12-year-old Jesus stumping religious scholars.

Ex-lepers hugging kids. The formerly blind taking art classes.

Wine where there was water. The crippled sponsoring the town dance. A sack lunch satisfying five thousand tummies. And, most of all, a grave:

guarded by soldiers, sealed by a rock, yet vacated by a three-day dead man. John has a word for such moments: "Glory." "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son...." (Jn. 1:14)

My prayer is that we, over the next few months, might see the same. For the balance of the year we plan to use our Sunday morning lessons to journey through the life of Jesus. Beginning with Jesus in pre-birth continuing on to Jesus at his promised return. We'll pause along the way at the "glory moments." Those occasions where Jesus' humanity and divinity converge, those conjunctions of diverse sources where the majestic intertwines with the mundane and we are left open-mouthed.

In fact, God being our helper, open mouths will be the first-fruit of such a quest. If his claims are true, he is the single most important person who has ever lived. No one comes close. He is not at the head of the parade; he is the parade. He's not the main event; he's the only event. He's not the MVP; he is the entire league.

And—this is important—he does not just answer prayers, he is reason for faith. The reward of Christianity is Christ.

Nothing compares to "...the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord." (Ph. 3:8)

The reward of seeing the Grand Canyon is not the T-shirt or the glass bubble with the snowflakes that fall when you shake it. The reward of the Grand Canyon is the Grand Canyon. The wide-eyed realization that you are a part of something ancient, splendid, and powerful. Something greater than you.

The reward of Christianity is Christ. Not money in the bank or a car in the garage or a healthy body or a better self image. Those are likely, yet secondary and tertiary fruits. But the first fruit, the cache, the treasure of faith is Him. Fellowship with Him. Walking with Him. Pondering Him. Exploring Him. The heart-stopping realization that in Him you are a part of something that is ancient, endless, unstoppable, and unfathomable. And that He, who can dig the Grand Canyon with his pinkie, knows you and thinks you're worth dying for. Christ is the reward of Christianity. Why else would Paul make Him his supreme desire? "I want to know Christ..." (Ph. 3:10) Our goal is the same. We ponder Christ to stir our awe.

We also study the incarnation to balance our faith. The title of the series may trouble you. Jesus: Our Next Door Savior is, for some, unsettling. Some are bugged by the "next door" part. To think that Jesus could be as human as the fellow you see changing his oil on Saturday morning? Some don't like that. Others don't mind the humanity; it's the divinity they resist. Call him prophet, a teacher, a revolutionary, but a Savior? Don't go that far. But we must. We must let him be all God and all man. All God so he can save you. All man so he can understand you. Dismiss either expression and you have to take issue with many passages of Scripture. "He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature." (Heb. 1:3) Jesus said, "Truly, truly I say unto you before Abraham was born, I am." (Jn 8:58) Paul urged Timothy to "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel" (I Tim. 2:8) See the confluence? "descendant of David" (next door) and "risen from the dead. (Savior).

Jesus: accessible enough to live next door. Mighty enough to be our Savior.

Such words can be said about no other person. He resists any effort to be lumped with Buddha, Mohammed or Moses. He cannot claim what he claimed and be regarded as a good man or great prophet. He is either divine or deluded, God or godless. Any attempt to categorize him in between is inaccurate.

My prayer is that these lessons will lead all of us to state for the first or the thousandth time, "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God."